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ABSTRACT

A Better Chance, Inc. (ABC) believes that nonwhite children can and will learn if given the opportunity. Over the past 16 years, ABC students--children of sharecroppers and lawyers, garbage collectors and doctors, from large cities and tiny hamlets--have, with ABC's help, succeeded at the nation's finest secondary schools and colleges. They now work in jobs traditionally beyond the reach of most poor and minority students--as corporate managers, investment analysts, surgeons, stockbrokers, and other professional occupations. Part of the problem that minority children face in public schools is declining expectations, whereas what they need is reinforcement in their beliefs that they can achieve in school and that achieving will make a difference in their lives. Problems that do exist should not be used to excuse low achievement. Indeed, schools have taken diverse initiatives to bolster achievement, such as honors high schools, internships, and collaboration with local private schools and colleges. If students are to remain motivated, they must have balanced information about admission to desirable programs and colleges and, particularly, information about the place of test scores in college admission. Motivation can also be improved if information about achievers and about opportunities is made available to public school students, who may then see for themselves that America can be a land of opportunity for them, too. (CMG)

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FIGHTING MYTHS, FACING PROBLEMS, AND FRAMING A NEW REALITY

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President
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Public elementary and secondary education is a major industry in the U.S. and its importance extends beyond its size. It is appalling, therefore, event to think about it as an area of steadily declining productivity. We can and must have basic public education that is effective in preparing all students with skills necessary for life and work and in preparing many of them for higher education. To achieve that goal, we must fight some increasingly persuasive myths, face and solve some real problems, and frame a new reality.

The major myths about public education can be summarized simply. They hold that the current crop of students can't and/or won't learn. These myths are persuasive to so many Americans because they appeal to the underlying racism that plagues every sector of the society. Since the "Johnny" who can't read or write is increasingly likely to be Black or Brown, it is easy to accept that the process of educating him is an uphill struggle or an impossible chore. When you add that Johnny's parents often are poor, even fewer people see potential for success.

Seeing the potential

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ABC, Inc. has been seeing that potential and helping to develop it for 16 years. We have found non-White children with outstanding ability whose parents were sharecroppers and garbage collectors as well as doctors and lawyers. The record of our 6,000 students alone should be sufficient proof that Johnny can learn, and wants to, if given an opportunity. Our students have come from the public schools of major cities and tiny hamlets to go on with our help and succeed at the finest secondary schools and colleges in the country.

They now are working at the kinds of jobs that traditionally have

involved few, if any, minority people or people from lower socioeconomic strata. Positions held by ABC alumni include: manager of corporate relations with Citicorp, stockbroker with E. F. Hutton, investment analyst with Morgan Stanley and Co., fiscal economist with the Office of Management and Budget, Choate Rosemary Hall faculty member, surgeon, deputy bureau chief with *Newsweek*, and law associate at Wilkie, Farr & Gallagher.

Are we to believe that these students can be found in the places where ABC has worked but not in other similar places? If they are in New York City, Columbus, Ohio, and Henderson, North Carolina, why would they be absent in other towns or cities? We believe they are everywhere, and we are expanding our recruitment network all over the country to put our money where our mouth is. Some of you may be interested in helping us, and, if you are, I assure you that assistance is welcome. We have over 1,000 volunteers around the country, but more are needed.

Why should you be interested? If you want to see minority people advance into types and levels of employment where they now are absent, ABC is the largest single source of access to the kind of secondary school opportunity that leads to those kinds of jobs. If you hate to see human potential that is not fully developed, you want to see exceptionally bright youngsters placed in the most stimulating possible educational settings. If you want students in our junior high schools to have concrete examples of the value of academic achievement, you want some of them to be accepted by ABC and become role models for the others.

In schools where students have been competing for and winning ABC places for several years, it is very difficult for anyone to talk about there being no point to education. Some schools in depressed areas like the South Bronx of New York City have made ABC a vital part of their efforts to motivate students. In one school, the ABC winners are announced each year at graduation and are greeted by a standing ovation.

Perhaps you share my frustration that the first thing visible when you enter most public secondary schools is a bunch of athletic trophies rather than any indicators of academic achievement. If so, you will share my excitement at the initiative shown by one New York City school that has made room amid the trophy cases for an ABC display documenting the academic accomplishments of students from there who have gone on to ABC schools.

Reverse the trend of declining expectations

If you believe that minority students can learn and can benefit from learning, you must stand up for your belief. The problems with the learning environments in our public schools do not all lie with the children or their parents. Many of the problems with children and their parents are the result of the "reverse Pygmalian" approach I already have described. We must reverse the trend of declining expectations in our public schools. Minority and poor families, in particular, need to be reinforced in their beliefs that they can achieve in school and that achieving will make a difference in their lives.

Facing the problems that exist, such as oversized classes and limited ability to offer specialized or advanced courses, does not mean acceptance of low achievement. As I travel around the country to cities where ABC has chapters, I am intrigued by the diverse initiatives public schools have taken. One which may become more widespread is developing honors or examination high schools. These specialized schools allow students to share with others of similar ability and motivation a more stimulating and highly focused academic experience than is generally available. An article by Fred Hechinger in the *New York Times* of April 29, 1980, gives an example of the impact of this kind of school.

> Carl Heye, 18, from the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, is now a senior at the Bronx High School of Science. He will attend Harvard College next year. . . But he remembers starting on the downhill slide—cutting classes, toying with drugs, considering dropping out—only a few years ago, when he was in junior high school, and nobody paid attention to his talents. 'I probably wouldn't have finished,' if Bronx Science had not responded to him as gifted, he said.

To cite another example of public school initiative, I will quote another small section of that article.

> The schools of Pinellas County, Florida, near Tampa, have established an internship program for gifted youngsters. Julie Seymour, 17, works as a law clerk to a federal judge. She said that, before that opportunity arose, she had been bored with classes and was 'dying to get out.'

Another initiative involves collaboration with local private schools. For example, the Houston Independent School District and the Kinkaid School conduct a summer program in science and engineering at Kinkaid for minority students from the public schools.

You also may be interested in opportunities for individual public school students regardless of their geographic location. The most intriguing to me are the short-term institutes offered by Andover. They allow intensive concentration on one subject for six weeks or so. As I understand it, the physics institute has about 20 percent minority participants.

A pernicious myth

One of the most pernicious myths in education today is that admission to desirable programs like the Andover institutes or ABC member schools is based almost exclusively on standardized test scores. A variation on the theme says only those with genius level scores need apply. Both are false. Test scores certainly are considered, and I think they should be. They are, however, one of many factors and not always the most important. Students with relatively low test scores sometimes are admitted and those with very high test scores sometimes are rejected. It is criminal not to get this message across to students who demonstrate ability in many ways but who do poorly on standardized tests. They must not be allowed to lose enthusiasm for education because of false impressions that they cannot achieve their objectives.

As people in education, it is critical for us to learn about the significance of test scores and to pass along that information to minority and poor kids. Their successful performance often is not easy to predict, based on standardized test scores such as those on the SAT.

ETS recently released information about the differences in average SAT scores between Black and White students. By combining its data with some gathered by ABC, I can give you the following information I think you will find interesting.

1. Black average nationwide in 1977 ..... = 684

2. Average of Black ABC graduates interviewed at a random sample of predominantly White colleges in 1977 ..... = 898

3. White average nationwide in 1977 ..... = 939

4. Average of ABC alumni entering Ivy League colleges in 1977 ..... = 1,003

Research by ABC indicates that SAT scores of 1,200 or more are rare for Black students. It also shows that ABC alumni with scores between 1,000 and 1,100 go on to compete successfully at the nation's top colleges.

None of the aggregate data I have presented should obscure the fact that individual minority students can and do excel on standardized tests. ABC students, for example, have scored over 700 on both the quantitative and verbal sections of the SAT. This year one of our Black students at the Laurel School in Cleveland was the first ever at the school to score perfect 800's on two College Board achievement tests.

My data also should not obscure the fact that ETS acknowledges that, within certain ranges, differences in SAT scores between any two students do not indicate significant ability differentials. As I speak at ABC member schools, I find widespread awareness that scoring 25, or even 50 points, higher than another student does not necessarily mean that you are smarter or that you, but not the other student, will be admitted to a highly selective college. I wonder if we have made that same information widely available to students in our public schools so that they and their parents can avoid overreacting to test scores.

I also wonder whether we have provided students in public schools with other balanced information about college admission and strongly countered rumors such as the following:

1. Any minority student can get into any college.
2. Top colleges no longer are emphasizing minority recruitment.
3. Top colleges are beyond the economic reach of all but a few minority students.

Not one of those statements is likely to motivate a minority student to the pursuit of academic excellence. Equally importantly, not one of those statements is true. I already have indicated that Ivy League and other top colleges are more selective than other colleges for Blacks as well as Whites. All of them continue to make a variety of efforts to maintain and increase minority enrollment. Finally, all of them continue to provide generous financial-aid packages so that, in some cases, a student's costs at an expensive private college can be lower than those at a local public college.

Motivation to pursue academic excellence

Being told about other minority students who are high achievers can help to motivate a student. For example, a lot of attention should be given to the fact that the first Black woman has been chosen as a Rhodes scholar. In talking about her, it is worthwhile noting that she is an alumna of an ABC member institution, the Taft School in Connecticut. Her lead is one that can and should be followed by substantial numbers of minority students in the years to come.

But who will gather and disseminate information about achievements and opportunities to public school students? In most cases guidance counselors are so overloaded that they are lucky even to meet minimal expectations for advising students. Is this not an area where expanded use of volunteers could be very helpful? In particular, is it not possible for alumni achievers to become effective motivators and communicators? The experience of our feeder schools with this type of activity has been good. ABC students and alumni usually are eager to return to those schools and talk with students, and they usually are very well received.

All of us need to be reminded that kids off "the block" or the farm can achieve if they are given opportunity and encouragement. It is better to reach them as early as possible, but even tenth grade is not too late. ABC's typical student has not been exposed to top quality education before tenth grade. Many of them nevertheless have gone on to graduate *cum laude* and even to be honored as the outstanding graduating senior at schools like Exeter. ABC has been part of so-called miracles like the son of a Georgia sharecropper going to a top school, college, and law school and joining a distinguished Atlanta law firm.

Now we are trying to expand our reach to people who may not have had an opportunity to participate in our basic program. This summer ABC and the Wharton School of Business are collaborating on a summer program for high school juniors. Students selected will attend classes taught by Wharton faculty and seminars conducted by successful business people from entrepreneurs like Herman Russell of Atlanta to representatives of corporations like Phillip Morris and Scott Paper.

If the early indications of success persist, this type of program will be expanded to several top business schools, and over 100 students

per year will receive exposure to a range of opportunities and contacts that historically were unknown to them. Along with the knowledge will come realistically higher aspirations. When young minority people start aspiring to become corporate chief executives while they are in high school, the odds that we will live to see the first Black president of a FORTUNE 500 company will increase greatly.

Similarly, the odds in favor of a Black headmaster of a top independent school are increasing as more Blacks--many of them ABC alumni—enter careers in independent schools. To stimulate that movement, ABC is collaborating with Andover on two sets of workshops this summer designed to expose young Blacks (college juniors, seniors, and recent graduates) to the opportunities in this industry. This kind of effort is critical at a time when the typical high school and college student is hearing nothing but discouraging words about the prospects for careers in education. The youngsters who are the targets of this conference need to know that America still can be a land of opportunity for them even if they want a career in education.

There is increasing awareness of that basic fact among public school employees, school board members, and other elected officials. Without their support neither ABC nor some of the other exciting and motivating programs that exist could have developed. Many people have tried to convince me that these kinds of officials are too short-sighted to support efforts like ABC. Thank goodness our experience suggests a contrary conclusion. We have received the strong support of people like Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles, the head of all the guidance counselors in Cleveland, school board members in cities as different as Boston and Houston, and literally hundreds of guidance counselors and teachers throughout the country.

A rising tide

To summarize my thoughts, I want to say that Jessie Jackson should not have a monopoly on pushing excellence. His program for public schools has been widely publicized and well received in a number of school districts. Whether it succeeds or fails, however, other efforts of the type I have been describing here today must be pursued. Jackson's focus is those students who are not now going to class regularly, doing their homework regularly, and honoring other basic norms of

the school society. My emphasis is on students who are doing those things but who need desperately to see samples of the opportunities and success their efforts can produce. I know of no cure-all medicine for all the ills afflicting the public schools today. I'm not discouraged by this because I believe there are medicines for specific ailments that are being tried and are being proved effective. It is my firm belief that if we can raise the ceiling that limits the realistic aspirations of the top students in our public schools, all the students in those schools will benefit. To use an expression made popular by President Kennedy: "a rising tide lifts everybody s boat." I feel that tide rising and ABC plans to move with it. I hope that you will join us in seeking to increase the range of opportunities available to students in our public schools.